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Progressive Education – Mindfulness in the Third Grade

By **Edna Moy-Rome**, 8/9s head teacher

Imagine seeing a classroom of 21 eight- and nine-year-olds sitting in the meeting area with eyes closed, breathing, taking a mindful moment, or watching children enter the classroom walking mindfully around the room after a transition from lunch, using that time to breathe and be aware of their bodies before they enter the meeting area, settled and ready to listen and learn. Imagine the possibilities if children develop a self-awareness of their thoughts and emotions, learn to accept everyday life's challenges and stresses, and find ways to bring calm and perspective to their lives. You may be wondering how this could be and in my work I discovered that it was possible by using mindfulness in the classroom.

Over the course of the 2013-14 school year, I had the opportunity to introduce and explore mindfulness in a third grade classroom. My students and I explored ways to approach classroom activities with purpose, calm, and intention. The mindfulness practices we shared deepened the children's ability to be reflective about the present moment, and brought a sense of physical and emotional calm to our classroom. It also helped develop children's deeper sense of awareness of themselves, and their responses and actions, as they reflected on their possible choices before responding to peers or their learning.

I knew a little about mindfulness from a workshop and learned more from reading several books on the subject. As a third grade classroom teacher for over 20 years, I have noticed that, over time, technology and social changes have affected both children and adults. The children of today face new challenges. They are growing up in a fast-paced world inundated with technology, a digital and instantaneous flow of information, and days filled with scheduled activities after the school day ends. When do they have time to mull over life, play imaginatively, dream, or think? I believe that, to various degrees, these challenges have impacted children's attention span, focus, concentration, and impulse control. These challenges affect the quality of the interactions with the peers and adults they encounter daily. These everyday stresses challenge the well-being of teachers and students alike, possibly impeding their ability to be fully present, calm, focused, thoughtful, and responsive in daily interactions with each other in the classroom. After learning about mindfulness, I wondered if taking a moment to breathe, pause, and reconnect the body with the mind is something that we all need: children, teachers, and parents.



My pursuit of mindfulness in the classroom was to see what effects it would have on the children, learning, and the environment. I wondered how could we grow children's attention, concentration, and focus, and imbue their attitude towards doing schoolwork with a deeper understanding of sustained attention and time needed to craft a project or solve a problem. How do we help children deepen their ability to be more thoughtful, reflective, and compassionate? How do we get children to become more aware of themselves before choosing how to respond to a peer rather than reacting impulsively? Would they improve their executive function skills? Would they be more productive? Would practicing mindfulness have any short-term or long-term effects? And, if so, what? I wanted to find out how practicing mindfulness would affect the classroom environment's sense of calmness and compassion as a community.

Mindfulness, what is it? How does it fit into school? "Mindfulness practice is the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose in the present moment, nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experiences moment to moment," (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). "Mindfulness is the awareness that emerges by paying attention to your life in the here and now with kindness and curiosity," (Saltzman, 2014). What is a mindful moment? It is the time spent focusing on your breathing with an inhalation and exhalation counting as one breath and can be as short as the count of 10 breaths or extended to a minute or more.

Neuroscience offers insights showing that mindfulness practice physically affects

the brain. Research indicates that mindfulness develops the brain's ability to produce new neurons and make neural connections, thereby increasing the area of the brain related to an individual's capacity to manage thoughts, emotions, and actions. This is also the area of the brain responsible for executive functions. Executive functions comprise cognitive flexibility, self-control, self-regulation, and working memory.

Executive function skills that are well developed are a strong predictor of future academic and personal success. Children who have higher executive function skills have, associated with them, positive developmental outcomes such as: on-task behavior, better perspective-taking skills, improved self esteem and sense of self, and relational success, including positive social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes. (Diamond, 2011; Tang, 2012)

When children are able to respond in thoughtful ways, they enable themselves to experience better decision-making. They develop the skill of becoming more self-aware and are better able to manage their emotions and behaviors, thereby enhancing their social emotional development and learning. It was the neuroscience of executive functions and social emotional learning that ultimately led me to choose to introduce mindfulness to a classroom of children. I discovered that setting aside time within our daily classroom schedule to take a mindful moment actually creates a calm and relaxed feeling that connects the body and mind by focusing on one's breathing. In addition, I experienced that mindfulness allows the mind to access that still, quiet place inside of you so that thoughtfulness, reflection, focus, and concentration are attainable. Even the classroom during this moment in time becomes a place of quiet and calm that begins to create an environment that sets the tone, allowing for intentional learning to occur.

My plan for the classroom was to ease in slowly, creating a realistic practice, with mindfulness sessions three times a week after the transition from lunch back into the classroom, before the children got ready to begin writing or work period. We began simply, early in the fall. After the initial conversation defining mindfulness, using a water bottle with glitter and shaking it, I asked children to think of this bottle as a metaphor of the mind. The water is the mind and the glitter represents all your thoughts and emotions, all swirling around. I shake the glitter bottle again and asked the children to use their eyes to follow the glitter's path from the top of the bottle to the bottom, where it settles, and to soften or close their eyes. I led them in a mindful moment. Many children followed along. There were a handful of children who were silly or giggly, although I continued to 'invite them' and asked that they try it. Over time more children joined in the process as they began to feel and experience for themselves what it was and how it felt. We often allowed time for children to articulate their thoughts and feelings about this new experience, helping to verbalize and acknowledge what was happening to them. Here are some comments:

“When I breathe in, my body moves up. When I breathe out, my body shortens. Sometimes I leave my eyes open and sometimes I close them. When I leave my eyes open, I look at something like the eraser on the board or the red magnet people. I feel calmed and relaxed.”

“It was really relaxing but it was hard to concentrate because of what happened at lunch, like I said ‘I hate you’ to myself. But eventually I forget about it and really enjoyed mindful moment today, right now.”

“Right now I feel very calm, steady, and relaxed. I also feel very, very tired and mindful. Mindful means to be calm, steady, relaxed, and kind to things around you.”

By late fall, I introduced the children to more mindfulness practices such as eating, walking, and standing. After each practice was introduced, we incorporated it into our daily routine. During snack, children would eat their snack mindfully. Some children expressed the challenge of sitting mindfully, so I created a variation of walking, I called tightrope walking. During tightrope walking, children were asked to imagine being a tightrope walker and to carefully place one foot directly in front of the other, heel to toe, and touch heel to toe for each step taken, as if walking on a tightrope. The focus was to notice the placement and sensations of their feet and notice their breathing. Children walked the perimeter of the classroom once around before entering the meeting area. When they entered, they were calm, steady, and ready for the next learning activity. Another variation of mindfulness practice was to stand mindfully in a posture I called stork standing, where the skill is to balance on one foot. This practice took concentration and focus, and also helped add variety to practicing mindfulness.

Anchor breathing is a verbal cue asking children to focus on their breathing as a home base. This is very practical and useful because it enables children to quickly reclaim their own breath and find their own stillness within. We discussed what the anchor of a boat does, which is, to keep a boat tethered to weight while the boat sways and rolls gently, yet remains in place. I asked the children to begin to breathe and that anytime their thoughts emerged, they should refocus their attention back on their breathing, placing their hand on their bellies to feel it rise with each inhalation and fall with exhalation, gently bringing the mind back to the breath. This practice is powerful because it allows children to begin their anchor breathing at any time, such as in the stairways, before a math quiz, before departing for a field trip, or during a meeting when the energy level and voices begin to rise. Children are quite responsive to anchor breathing and it helps children to regain composure and attention to the moment. Here are comments from children about the mindfulness practices of standing, walking, and eating.

“I like mindful tightrope walking because it really helps me because I’m a kind of person who can’t really stand still and I really like mindful tightrope because I can move and be mindful at the same time. My breathing was like the sound of the ocean.”

“I notice when you eat mindfully you really taste the food and the texture of the food. You can really change your mind if you like the food or if you don’t like the food. Mindful eating makes me feel calm and relaxed.”

“Tadasana (mountain pose) is a yoga pose. You can use it for mindfulness. This is what you do, stand up and put your hand out and your feet level and flat on the ground. Close your eyes. I feel so calm and quiet. Nothing is distracting me because my eyes are closed.”

How was academic work impacted by mindfulness practices? One example was on a field trip to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Children prepared their explorer notebooks in advance of our departure and had three rubric questions as guidelines to gather information, record, and sketch what they would see there. There was tremendous excitement about the trip and the chance to see the artifacts. Before we left school, we took a mindful moment and then departed with notebooks in hand. This exhibit was very crowded with wave after wave of tourists. The children were in small groups accompanied by an adult. At the museum, children listened attentively to my voice and directions to choose one out of several textiles in each room.



The children were very focused on their textiles. Each child went diligently to work, recording information and sketching the artifact, moving from gallery to gallery alongside the flow

of people. I was especially impressed by children with a variety of academic needs and learning variations whose focus and attention to both the writing and drawings was superb. Overall, the drawings and descriptive writing were astounding, especially knowing the range of learning abilities among the children’s various academic

and artistic skills. The drawings of many individuals were exceptionally detailed and thoughtfully drawn. What I noticed about the children on this trip was their ability to really focus and zoom in on each textile while many people around them were walking and chatting. Despite the many distractions, the children maintained extraordinary focus and concentration.

As we progressed into using mindfulness in the classroom, a surprise finding was that children at times outside of school took a mindful moment. They shared their practices with the class and how it helped them in various activities such as: before homework, during sports, before a violin or piano lesson, or when they had trouble falling asleep, lying in bed. Some children reported that they made their own glitter bottles. A few children said they had conversations with their parents about what they were learning about mindfulness in class.

Looking back at the process of my work using mindfulness with third graders has helped me discover and recognize the benefits of improving children's sense of calm and well-being. It enhanced their ability to listen actively and strengthened their ability to focus and concentrate on schoolwork and activities throughout their day. Mindfulness practices can be readily done within many moments of a school day in both a structured and spontaneous manner. I found that practicing mindfulness enhances children's ability to self-regulate and self-monitor behavior, and encourages thoughtful expressions of communications in both word and deed with peers.

Children develop a greater understanding of themselves as learners and as individuals as they grow more aware of their bodies and minds connected to the present moment. The classroom environment grows into a climate of compassion and caring for one another. Learning is enhanced and deepened, and children learn to take a moment or a breath to think before they respond, thus creating a community of more self-aware and thoughtful individuals.

Mindfulness is a powerful tool, or strategy, for children to learn, to help them cultivate the qualities of focus, concentration, perspective-taking, calm, and an overall sense of well-being. In many ways mindfulness for both teachers and students can change their way of being in school and potentially become a lifelong skill.